

THE TOUCHED LIFE by David Ray. The Scarecrow Press,
Metuchen, NJ. \$13.00 (cloth)

David Ray's newest collection of poems, his eighth, includes generous selections from his previous books, and forty pages of new poems. Thoreau wrote, "All nature is my bride." Ray's guiding principle may be: All experience is my bride. It is not a matter, in his poetry, of Art being extracted from experience. For Ray, the experience is the Art. No subject is too small, too trivial, too "unpoetic" for him; he does not believe that every poem should be an attempt to satisfy immortal longings. He makes this point clear in the poem "W.C.W.":

knew a poet
doesn't have to be on
his best behavior

all the time, has
many bad
poems, very
lifelike, very

relaxed, and breaks
into song
only on occasion

as all folks do,
walking along.

As Robert Peters accurately notes in his introduction to *The Touched Life*, "Ray is a brutally honest man; he sees life, in a sense, without eyelids." But his realism is tempered by compassion and a deep reservoir of hope. His greatest hope, as he writes in the book's title poem, is to achieve the "miracle of human closeness." It is this hope that informs almost all of his poems. The delicate relationships and connections of humanity -- ancestors and descendants, parents and children, husbands and wives, friends and strangers -- are the recurrent subjects of his poems. Love, or lack of it, is the determining characteristic of those connections. In subtle and ambivalent ways, images of money are often used to suggest a medium of exchange that carries emotional, rather than monetary, value.

Ray has practically created a sub-genre of poems about garage sales and flea-markets, those typically American enterprises in which lives connect with lives through barter and bargain and exchange of coin. What stories of the collective human attachment there are in the material remnants of our lives, and what sorrow also. Both the closeness and the sadness are called forth metaphorically through the use of money images in the poem entitled "Garage Sale," which begins:

We came for the old days.
Bride's portrait in her veil.
And from the rocking chair
she herself - same long nose -

waves aside objections:
"Take it and the marriage
license too!" As if there'd
been no light, no spindle
post, no moaning at the bar,
no silver dollar in
the oaken drawer.

Here the silver dollar is a magical talisman, a symbol of luck and love, hope and bright beginnings. Its quality is numinous, not numismatic. But the image of coin soon changes, becoming the instrument by which all goods are rendered worthless:

...a groom is not
an heirloom and nothing's
not for sale, for a dime
or a dollar - here's grampa's
collar.

In "Father" and "Marks on a Wall," two poems about the relationships of parents to children, the connection is made again between "human closeness" and the feeling that "all but love [is] for sale. And maybe that." ("Another Garage Sale"). In "Father," the poet puts his children on a bus, he "kissed them, / handed them money..." and then describes himself as "Keeper of the mint, / engravings, portraits, signatures." In "Marks on a Wall," the poet looks at the pencil marks and dates that recorded the changing heights of his growing children. He addresses himself: "These dates, though you scrawled them, / look like those on archaic / coins, found deep in the earth." Another example of the money/emotion equation occurs in the poem, "The Telephone," in which voices of the poet's family and friends, some of them dead, speak to him. After all have had their say, the poet asks his lover if she will speak, "But she was silent like a bronze penny." After the

barrage of voices, the statuesque silence is probably welcome relief, thus making the coin image a positive one.

By using images of money in his poetry, Ray is not saying something so trite as that money prevents us from really loving each other. The images serve as a symbol for both love and the lack of it, a physical representation of the ambiguous, ambivalent, vague notions we have of love. The many associations we bring to the concept of money, both positive and negative, give the poems a tangible texture and complexity that is difficult to achieve when the subject is that most abstract of abstractions, love.

David Ray's poems are deceptive. They seem simple, straightforward, developed more by association than design, and tossed off as casually as an old sweater. And the poet encourages that perception with poems like the previously quoted "W.C.W." But on a closer examination, it becomes apparent that there is much going on beneath the surface of these poems, among them the conflict and contradictions that produce lasting art.

Eric Nelson